

# Additions to the avifauna of Congo-Brazzaville

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**Compléments à l'avifaune du Congo-Brazzaville.** Cet article présente 18 espèces nouvelles pour le pays depuis la publication de Dowsett-Lemaire & Dowsett (1998) et de quelques études publiées par la suite. Les données concernent dix espèces afrotropicales, sept visiteurs paléarctiques occasionnels et une espèce introduite, et proviennent de la Réserve communautaire du Lac Télé, dans le département de la Likouala, la Réserve de Lesio-Louna et la côte. Parmi celles-ci, les premières observations du Tisserin de Weyns *Ploceus weynsi*, dont quelques rassemblements particulièrement importants ont été notés, le plus grand groupe comprenant au moins 20.000 individus. Des informations supplémentaires sont également fournies concernant quatre espèces peu connues dont la présence dans le pays avait déjà été documentée.

**Summary.** This paper documents 18 additions to the list of the birds of Congo-Brazzaville since the publication of Dowsett-Lemaire & Dowsett (1998) and a few studies published subsequently. The records concern ten Afrotropical species, seven rare Palearctic migrants or vagrants, and one introduced species, and come from the Lac Télé Community Reserve, Likouala department, the Lesio-Louna Reserve and the coast. Among these are the first observations in the country of Weyns's Weaver *Ploceus weynsi*, of which a few remarkably large flocks were seen, one comprising at least 20,000 individuals. Details of sightings of four species that were already on the Congo-Brazzaville list but about which little is known in the country are also provided.

The birds of Congo-Brazzaville have been studied by relatively few experienced observers. Amongst the most important studies are those of R. J. Dowsett and F. Dowsett-Lemaire (see e.g. Dowsett 1993, Dowsett-Lemaire *et al.* 1993, Dowsett-Lemaire & Dowsett 1998) and J. Mokoko Ikonga (2003). Recent additions to the country's avifaunal list by Dowsett-Lemaire & Dowsett (1998) brought the total to 639 species; subsequently, the occurrence of an additional seven species has been documented (Bulens & Dowsett 2001, Mokoko Ikonga & Bokandza-Paco 2001, Mokoko Ikonga & Rainey 2005, Mamonekene & Bokandza-Paco 2006, King & Chamberlan 2007). Here we present details of another 18 species new to the Congo-Brazzaville list. We also provide details of sightings of four species that were already known to occur (Black Heron *Egretta ardesiaca*, White Stork *Ciconia ciconia*, Red-capped Lark *Calendrella cinerea* and Lesser Bristlebill *Bleda notata*), but about which little is known in Congo-Brazzaville.

Taxonomy, order and nomenclature follow Borrow & Demey (2001) with updates as appropriate from Borrow & Demey (2004). The probable status of each species in the country is indicated as follows: R = resident; M = intra-African migrant; P = Palearctic migrant.

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### Great White Pelican *Pelecanus onocrotalus* M

RV saw an adult flying south over the wetlands near the Loya River mouth, in the M'Pita area of Pointe-Noire, on 27 October 2003. It flew parallel to the Loya River at 300–400 m from the water, at a height of c.50–60 m. The pelican was largely bright white, with contrasting black flight feathers; the bill pouch was yellow. RV, who has seen this species previously in Kenya and Cameroon, noted that the bird was much whiter and had a brighter yellow bill than Pink-backed Pelican *P. rufescens*, with which he is also familiar. There appear to be no other recent observations of *P. onocrotalus* in Congo-Brazzaville, although the species has been recorded in Gabon (Sargeant 1993, Schepers & Marteiijn 1993, Vande weghe 2005) and Cabinda (Malbrant & Maclatchy 1949). Malbrant & Maclatchy (1949) may have observed this species on the Congo River several times ('à plusieurs reprises'). Brown *et al.* (1982) map its presence in inland Congo-Brazzaville, but this is based on approximations of distribution and does not imply specific observations of the species.



Figure 1. Martial Eagle / Aigle martial *Polemaetus bellicosus*, Lefini Faunal Reserve, 21 July 2006 (Tony King)



Figure 2. House Sparrow / Moineau domestique *Passer domesticus*, Pointe-Noire, 12 November 2005 (Tony King)



Figure 3–4. Lesser Bristlebill *Bleda notata ugandae*, Lesio-Louna Reserve, 3 November 2005 (Christelle Chamberlan). Note the dull greenish-yellow loreal spot (bright yellow in the nominate race); the yellow tips to the outer tail feathers are also 5–10 mm wider than in *B. n. notata*.

Bulbul jaunelore *Bleda notata ugandae*, Réserve de Lesio-Louna, 3 novembre 2005 (Christelle Chamberlan). Noter la tache vert-jaune terne en avant de l'œil (jaune vif chez la sous-espèce nominale); le pointes jaunes sur les rectrices externes sont 5–10 mm plus large que chez *B. n. notata*.



**Pink-backed Pelican *Pelecanus rufescens* R/M**  
Mokoko Ikonga (2003) made the first observation in Lac Télé Community Reserve (LTCR) in 2001 of one individual. Local people reported that it previously bred at a colony near Dzéké village, in central LTCR, but was extirpated by hunting in the late 1970s. Subsequent observations were made in LTCR by JMI and HJR: two individuals in March 2002, one in November and five in March 2006, and three, including one bird carrying nesting material at the Massolo waterbird colony near Botongo, in December 2006. The birds were identified by their overall grey plumage, little contrast between the remiges and wing-coverts, and pale yellow bill. Recent conservation activities in LTCR may have encouraged this species' return. Previous unconfirmed records include those of Malbrant & Maclatchy (1949) who observed it on the Congo River. It was appar-

ently first noted by Dybowski (Malbrant & Maclatchy 1949). Chapin (1932), who worked on the other side of the river, in Congo-Kinshasa, recorded it at Stanley Pool, and thus observations of this species in Congo-Brazzaville are not surprising. An observation of a pelican colony by Verschuren & Mbani Akangala Mankarika (1982) just south of the Congo-Brazzaville border in Cabinda in 1981 is not precise enough for specific identification. However, if indeed the birds were nesting in trees, they were likely to be *P. rufescens*: *P. onocrotalus* nests on the ground.

**Martial Eagle *Polemaetus bellicosus* R/M**  
A second- or third-year bird, identified by its very large size, mainly white head and underparts, and finely barred tail, was observed and photographed by TK in the south-west part of Lefini Faunal Reserve on 21 July 2006; it was perched on a tall

termite mound in open savanna next to the Louna River, just north of the northern boundary of the adjacent Lesio-Louna Reserve (Fig. 1). Adults were sighted on two occasions in November 2006, both in or near the same part of the Lefini Faunal Reserve. This species is also known from the Batéké Plateau in Gabon (Christy 2001a; TK pers. obs.)

#### **Red-footed Falcon** *Falco vespertinus* P

One and two females observed in LTCR, flying along the Likouala-aux-Herbes River, on 5 and 15 October 2005, respectively, by HJR. The birds were seen in good light at c.20–30 m. They were medium-sized falcons with an orange-rufous crown and chest, and red legs; these features distinguish the species from African Hobby *Falco cucvierii* and Amur Falcon *F. amurensis*. The dates suggest that these Palearctic migrants were on passage to their wintering grounds in southern Africa.

#### **Greater Painted Snipe** *Rostratula benghalensis* R

A female was observed by RV in wetlands near the mouth of the Loya River, in the M'Pita neighbourhood of Pointe-Noire, on 25 March 2003. Subsequent sightings in the same area include: two males and a female on 30 October 2003; two males and two females on 29 January 2004; an unspecified number on 30 January 2004; a male and a female on 14 May 2004; and a male and two females on 19 April 2005. Urban *et al.* (1986) map its presence in central Congo-Brazzaville but this is based on approximations of distribution; it is not listed by Dowsett (1993). Probably resident, as the species was observed on a wide range of dates. Previously recorded at Loango in Cabinda, the Congo River in Congo-Kinshasa and Port-Gentil and the Ogooué delta on the Gabon coast (Malbrant & Maclatchy 1949, Christy 2001b).

#### **Broad-billed Sandpiper** *Limicola falcinellus* P

A group of at least six in non-breeding plumage was seen by RV foraging on mudflats of the M'Pita neighbourhood, Pointe-Noire, on 27 October 2003. RV observed a similar number on a subsequent visit on 28 January 2004: possibly the same group. On both occasions several other waders were present, including Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea*. The birds were noticeably smaller than the latter, with shorter legs, a shorter, less curved bill, and a somewhat more streaked

upper breast. The diagnostic split supercilium was less distinct than anticipated, but this is a variable character that may not be so obvious in non-breeding birds (Borrow & Demey 2001, Stevenson & Fanshawe 2002). This species is rarely recorded in western Africa. Previous nearest records, all from the coast, are from Gabon (one at Owendo, near Libreville, 27 March–3 April 1983; Christy 1990; two at the Moka River mouth, 3 September 1999: N. Borrow in *Bull. ABC* 7: 74) and Cameroon (one at La Digue, Douala, 21 November 1993: Sørensen *et al.* 1996).

#### **Marsh Sandpiper** *Tringa stagnatilis* P

One was observed on the beach in Conkouati-Douli National Park on 17 June 2007, by JMI and the WCS waterbird survey team. The thin straight bill, thin legs and overall gracile appearance enabled identification. This species is known from two sites in coastal Gabon (Christy 2001b), so its discovery in Conkouati-Douli National Park, at the border with Gabon, is unsurprising.

#### **Long-tailed Skua** *Stercorarius longicaudus* P

An adult was found dead in a fishing net in the south of LTCR on 31 January 2001 by JMI (Mokoko Ikonga 2003). The very long tail feathers were evident, separating it from other *Stercorarius* species. This appears to be the first record for mainland central Africa (Urban *et al.* 1986).

#### **Grey-headed Gull** *Larus cirrocephalus* M

A large flock of more than 200, including a small number of adults with distinctive grey heads, was recorded south of Bouanéla, in southern LTCR, during annual waterbird counts in February 2002 (Mokoko Ikonga 2003). An adult was also observed at Stanley Pool, on the Congo River, on 21 January 2003 by JMI. M. Agnagna (pers. comm.) observed a large flock of hundreds of gulls on Lac Télé (date unknown) which may have been this species. There are very few records in this part of Africa, although one was collected by a fisherman on the Sangha River, Central African Republic, in October 1981 (Green & Carroll 1991).

#### **Laughing Dove** *Streptopelia senegalensis* R

One was observed on 30 June 2007 by HJR in Pokola forest concession, part of the Nouabalé-

Ndoki National Park (NNNP) periphery. Its distinctive chestnut back, white outer tail tips and black and grey wings were very evident. It was on a broad causeway across a river and surrounding swamp forest, c.1 km from the logging town Ndoki 1, south of NNNP, within the PROGEPP (Programme de Gestion de la Périphérie du Parc). The nearest previous records of this species are from Dja in Cameroon (Christy 1994), as well as southern Central African Republic (Borrow & Demey 2004). It is commonly seen in human-modified habitats elsewhere in its range (Borrow & Demey 2001; HJR pers. obs.), and its occurrence in Congo-Brazzaville is perhaps an unfortunate indicator of the opening of formerly closed forest. There was a possible sighting in 2005, on the road between Épéna in LTCR and Impfondo, but it was too brief to be confirmed (HJR pers. obs.). Other recent sightings of non-forest species in the forests of northern Congo-Brazzaville, including Hoopoe *Upupa epops* in Kabo town and near Épéna (HJR pers. obs.), and Spotted Hyaena *Crocuta crocuta* in Kabo logging concession (P. Elkan pers. comm.), also in PROGEPP, are further indicators of ongoing deforestation. Along with Equatorial Guinea, Congo-Brazzaville was one of the few sub-Saharan countries from which *S. senegalensis* had not previously been recorded.

#### **Common Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus* P**

First seen by HJR in gallery woodland and forest on the Likouala-aux-Herbes and Bailly rivers during waterbird counts in LTCR on 19–25 February 2005, when three and four birds, including at least three of the hepatic form, were found on two days. The hepatic birds distinguish the species from African Cuckoo *C. gularis*, which has not yet been identified in the reserve. Subsequently, the species was recorded at several sites throughout the reserve, on 5, 13 and 15 October, 2 November 2005 and 3 March 2006. Common Cuckoo has been recorded throughout Central African Republic and most of Cameroon, with a few observations in Gabon (Brosset & Énard 1986, Carroll 1988, Borrow & Demey 2004). The nearest observation is from Lobéké in Cameroon (Dowsett-Lemaire & Dowsett 2000). Chapin (1939) believed he saw one at Lukolela, on the Congo River in Congo-Kinshasa.

#### **Familiar Chat *Cercomela familiaris* R**

Two birds, presumed to be a pair, were observed by RV on a savanna hillside with rocky outcrops at Ngouédi, midway between Pointe-Noire and Brazzaville, a few kilometres north of the border with Congo-Kinshasa, on 12 September 2004. They were apparently nesting, as they went back and forth from a rock niche to forage in nearby cultivation. They had a plain, dark brown back, a bright rufous rump and tail, the latter with dark central feathers and dark brown tips, in an inverted 'T' pattern, a paler grey-brown breast and a pale eye-ring. The birds were quite active, often flicking their wings, and were silent during the c.30 minutes of observation. The previous known northern limit of the species' southern distribution was Manyanga, Bas-Congo region of Congo-Kinshasa, and Cabinda (Malbrant & Maclatchy 1949, Keith *et al.* 1992). In western Africa, it is known from the savanna zone (Borrow & Demey 2001).

#### **European Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus* P**

Three *Acrocephalus* warblers observed by HJR in LTCR, in long grass close to the Likouala-aux-Herbes River, near Épéna, on 13 January 2005, 22 January 2006 and 24 February 2006, were confidently identified as this species. They were not as large as Great Reed Warbler *A. arundinaceus*, which is commonly seen in LTCR, had warm brown plumage, and primaries extending beyond the rump; no vocalisations were heard. *A. scirpaceus* is known from several nearby localities (e.g. Lobéké in Cameroon: Dowsett-Lemaire & Dowsett 2000; various localities including Bangui in Central African Republic: Germain & Cornet 1994). Interestingly, Chapin (1953) recorded *A. arundinaceus* from many wetlands and along rivers in Congo-Kinshasa, but mentions only two *A. scirpaceus* specimens, both of these from eastern Congo-Kinshasa.

#### **Capuchin Babbler *Phyllanthus atripennis* R**

One was observed flying across the Likouala-aux-Herbes River near Itanga, in LTCR, on 5 October 2005, by HJR. It was seen at a distance of c.30 m. The grey head and chestnut body were distinctive, although the observation of only a single was atypical. No calls were heard. The nearest records are from Bwamanda in Congo-Kinshasa (Schouteden 1962), southern Central African Republic (Carroll

1988, Borrow & Demey 2004), and it has also been collected at Bangui (Chapin 1953).

#### **Isabelline Shrike** *Lanius isabellinus* P

A first-winter was seen 1 km east of Epéna on 12 November 2007 by HJR. The rufous tail and rump, grey-brown mantle, wings and head, indistinct mask and faint scalloping on the breast-sides were evident. These features distinguish it from first-winter Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio* (head, mantle and wings warm brown) or first-winter Souza's Shrike *L. souzae* (head, mantle and wings warm brown with more extensive scalloping). This individual was perched on a grass stem in seasonally flooded savanna (floods receding by this date) and flycatching. The nearest record of this Palearctic migrant is from Bwamanda in Congo-Kinshasa (Schouteden 1962). The observation in LTCR falls within two days of those of a Eurasian Hobby *Falco subbuteo* (previously only known from Odzala NP and LTCR) and of *Calandrella cinerea* (this study), suggesting that conditions may have been suitable for migrating birds. *L. collurio*, also a Palearctic migrant, has already been recorded from LTCR (HJR pers. obs.) and is known from the west of Congo-Brazzaville and Gabon. *L. souzae* is resident on the Batéké Plateau in central Congo-Brazzaville and is not known to be migratory.

#### **House Sparrow** *Passer domesticus* R

A small, mixed-sex group was observed by TK on 12 November 2005, foraging on the wooden floor of a beach-side restaurant in Pointe-Noire. The white cheeks and chestnut upperparts of a male suggest they were of the race *indicus* (Fig. 2). Further observations in December 2006 suggest the species is fairly common in the town, but still out-numbered by Northern Grey-headed Sparrow *P. griseus* (TK pers. obs.). A widespread species in southern Africa but found in only a few scattered locations in western Africa, the nearest records being from Chad and the Lake Chad area (Borrow & Demey 2004, Fry & Keith 2004). Surprisingly, there are no records as yet from Libreville or elsewhere in Gabon (Borrow & Demey 2004, TK pers. obs.).

#### **Weyn's Weaver** *Ploceus weynsi* M?

Huge, cloud-like, wheeling, hesitant flocks of at least 5,000 weavers were identified as this species

at Épéna, in LTCR, on 13 January 2005. Large flocks were observed in January–March 2005, September 2005–October 2006 and January 2007. In July 2006, a flock of more than 10,000 birds and another comprising at least 20,000 individuals were seen. Weyn's Weaver has been observed in farmbrush, secondary forest and, occasionally, the edge of swamp forest, throughout most of LTCR, including on the Bailly River in the west and near Mokengui in the north. In flight this species may initially resemble Village Weaver *P. cucullatus* but the upperparts are darker, and the wavering, wheeling flight patterns of large flocks are unmistakable. The previous largest known flocks known were of 200 birds (Fry & Keith 2004). Young or eclipse-plumage birds may resemble *P. cucullatus* as the pale eye is not always distinct, even at close range. Overall, however, *P. weynsi* is much darker and the pale fringes to the greater coverts are very distinct. The higher pitched voice is also useful to distinguish the bird in flight. As the species is known from western Congo-Kinshasa (Malbrant & Maclatchy 1949, Chapin 1954), its occurrence here is unsurprising. It is known to wander erratically (Fry & Keith 2004) and its occurrence in Congo-Brazzaville may only be sporadic, as the species was only discovered here in 2005, despite experienced observers having counted waterbirds in LTCR since 1997, and it is very unlikely that the huge flocks would have remained unobserved. This is a very poorly known bird; neither breeding nor the voice have been recorded.

#### **Cuckoo Finch** *Anomalospiza imberbis* R

Single males were observed near Epéna in LTCR by HJR on 16 October and 3 December 2006, with a third 5 km away on 9 December 2007. The first was seen in lightly flooded grassland at a distance of c.20 m. It was perched in short grass c.60 cm above ground. The second was perched 7 m high in a dead tree at the edge of a manioc field near grassland and a patch of secondary forest. The third was on 2-m tall grass in a small patch of savanna between the Likouala-aux-Herbes River and secondary forest and cocoa plantations. All individuals had a bright yellow head, breast and belly. The upperparts were heavily and regularly streaked green and dark brown. The bill was black and conical, unlike that of the weavers present in such habitat in LTCR (e.g. Slender-billed Weaver

*Ploceus pelzelni*, Black-headed Weaver *P. melanocephalus*, and Village Weaver *P. cucullatus*). They were larger than *P. pelzelni* and smaller than *P. melanocephalus*. As the first bird flew off, it uttered a soft *tsip tsip tsip* call, similar to the recording on Chappuis (2000). This species has a patchy distribution throughout its range (Borrow & Demey 2001, Fry & Keith 2004) and has a preference for moist grasslands. The nearest known record is from Boyagati, Congo-Kinshasa (Schouteden 1962).

#### Additional data on selected species

##### Black Heron *Egretta ardesiaca* R/M

First observed by JMI and HJR in 2001–05 on the Likouala-aux-Herbes River in LTCR (Mokoko Ikonga & Rainey 2005). On 8 August 2006, one was seen at the exit of Conkouati lagoon into the sea, in Conkouati-Douli National Park, by HJR. The all-feathered, dark face and dark eye were clearly seen. The nearest records are from Gabon, where the species is a vagrant (Christy 1982).

##### White Stork *Ciconia ciconia* P

Two were observed by TK on 21 December 2004 in freshly burnt grassland halfway up the escarpment of Epopé, on the north bank of the Lefini River, c.5 km west of the Lefini / Louna confluence in Lefini Faunal Reserve. This is the second record of this species in Congo-Brazzaville, the first being of one bird with a flock of Woolly-necked Storks *Ciconia episcopus*, on 22 February 2000, at the confluence of the Bailly River with the Likouala-aux-Herbes (Mokoko Ikonga & Bokandza-Paco 2001). The nearest observations are from Bamanya and Iyonda, in Congo-Kinshasa (Schouteden 1961).

##### Red-capped Lark *Calandrella cinerea* M

Two larks were observed on a muddy track just outside Epéna in LTCR, on 11 November 2007, by HJR. Both had a red cap, a white supercilium, white underparts, and rufous-streaked breast-sides. One was more sandy coloured than the other, which was of a more greyish hue. They were feeding and could be approached to c.10 m. This species had previously been observed near Brazzaville (Dowsett & Dowsett-Lemaire 1989) and is known from Ipeko and Ikengo (Schouteden

1961) and near Kinshasa in Congo-Kinshasa (Chapin 1953).

##### Lesser Bristlebill *Bleda notata* R

The distinctive subspecies *B. n. ugandae* was recorded by Rand *et al.* (1959) from Impfondo on the Oubangui River in Congo-Brazzaville (85 km east of LTCR). Aside from this observation, *B. n. ugandae* had not previously been recorded from Congo-Brazzaville. We observed, trapped and photographed this subspecies in closed forest on the edge of Nouabalé-Ndoki National Park at Bomassa (JMI), in gallery forest in the Lesio-Louna Reserve (TK) and in swamp and secondary forest in LTCR, where it is fairly common (HJR) (Figs. 3–4). *B. n. notata* has been recorded west of the Sangha River, in the Kouilou, at Dimonika and in Odzala National Park (Dowsett-Lemaire & Dowsett 1989, Dowsett & Dowsett-Lemaire 1991, Dowsett-Lemaire 1997). The two taxa may be separated in Congo-Brazzaville by the Sangha River in the north and savannas of the Batéké Plateau in the south. The nearest records in Congo-Kinshasa are from Equateur region on the east bank of the Oubangui River (R. J. Dowsett *in litt.* 2008), as well as being widely found elsewhere in the dryland and swamp forests of western Congo-Kinshasa (e.g. Schouteden 1923, Chapin 1953; R. J. Dowsett *in litt.* 2008), in similar habitat to that in LTCR. Given the observation in Nouabalé-Ndoki National Park, its occurrence in southern Central African Republic, east of the Sangha River, is a possibility.

#### Discussion

We added 18 species to the list of birds known from Congo-Brazzaville. Since the last review of the birds of Congo-Brazzaville, which listed 639 species (Dowsett-Lemaire & Dowsett 1998), Nyanza Swift *Apus nyansae* has been deleted from the country list (Herroelen 2003). The maps in Borrow & Demey (2001, 2004) indicate *Acrocephalus scirpaceus*, Black-necked Wattle-eye *Dyaphorophyia chalybea* and Woodchat Shrike *Lanius senator* as occurring in Congo-Brazzaville. These mapped distributions are approximations and in fact only the former has been claimed from the country (this study). A number of new species have been observed recently (*Egretta ardesiaca*, *Ciconia ciconia*, Sladen's Barbet *Gymnobucco*

*sladeni*, Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird *Pogoniulus chrysoconus*, Miombo Pied Barbet *Tricholaema frontata*, Red-headed Picathartes *Picathartes oreas*: Mokoko Ikonga & Bockandza-Paco 2001, Mokoko Ikonga 2003, Mokoko Ikonga & Rainey 2005, Mamonekene & Bockandza-Paco 2006, King & Chamberlan 2007). If Green-breasted Pitta *Pitta reichenowi* and Bates's Paradise Flycatcher *Terpsiphone batesi* are recognised as separate species (as in Keith *et al.* 1992, Urban *et al.* 1997, Borrow & Demey 2001, 2004) the total bird list for Congo-Brazzaville stands at 665. It is likely that the total will continue to rise given that relatively few sites have been studied. In particular, southern Congo-Brazzaville (Lekoumou and Bouenza regions) and the areas bordering northern (e.g. the proposed Ougoué-Leketi National Park, west Sangha region) and southern Gabon (e.g. Conkouati-Douli National Park, north Kouilou and Niari regions) have received little attention. Some species possibly use the open savanna habitats that run 300 km north–south across otherwise dense forest, such as those along the Likouala River in Lac Télé Community Reserve, as flyways to traverse the closed forest of the Congo basin. A number of taxa, including Wahlberg's Honeyguide *Prodotiscus regulus* and Forest White-eye *Zosterops (senegalensis) stenocricotus*, have been claimed but require confirmation. The possible presence of a crane species has been suggested by local people from the Bouenza region.

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